

Publicly or Privately Shaming Harms Kids

By Kathy Slattengren, M. Ed., [Priceless Parenting](#)

Do you remember being scolded with “Shame on you!” growing up? Perhaps it was followed with “You should know better than that!” How did it make you feel? Probably pretty bad.

For many generations shame has been a primary parenting tool. Brené Brown explains the power of using shame in [The Gifts of Imperfect Parenting](#). “The truth is you can change a child's behavior on a dime with shame. For this simple reason - children experience shame as the threat of being unlovable. And so it's not very difficult to use shame to turn their behaviors around.”

So if it's effective why not use it? Because it damages your children's feelings of self-worth.

Understanding Shame and Guilt

Before diving deeper into the problems with shaming, it's helpful to define shame and how it's different than guilt. Dr. Brené Brown researches shame. By her definition “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”

A fundamental need of all people is to feel a sense of love and belonging. Shame is powerful because it threatens this essential requirement. Using shame pressures your kids to change their behavior – not because they want to behave differently but rather they want to avoid your withdrawal of love.



Guilt is a feeling of remorse or regret for your actions. When you feel guilty, you are comparing something you've done or failed to do against your own ideals. Guilt can motivate you to make amends for a mistake or take responsibility for your actions. Guilt is felt more in your gut and shame in your heart.

Your response to your children's behavior can induce feelings of shame or guilt. For example, let's imagine your child grabs a toy from another child. Your response will affect what your child feels:

- Shame: You slap your child's hand scolding “You are bad!” and return the toy to the other child.
- Guilt: You explain “Sam was still using the shovel when you took it. What can you do to make this better?”

How about the situation where your child knows he needs to get his homework done before playing any video games. You see that he's playing video games and his homework isn't done.

- Shame: You yell “Shut that thing off! You know better than to be playing video games when your homework isn't done!”

- Guilt: You ask “What is our agreement about playing video games and homework?”

Feeling guilty can light your children’s internal desire to be truer to their better selves. Feeling shame is likely to fuel poor behavior choices because it damages your children’s belief that they can do better.

Shaming Kids

How are kids shamed? Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples.

- Yelling at kids “You are a bad boy/girl!”
- Threatening kids that they are going to put up for adoption
- [Forcing kids to hold a sign in public](#) stating things like “I am a thief. Do not trust me.”
- [Cutting a child’s hair](#) in a way that encourages others to make fun of that child
- Hitting a child including [paddling kids at school](#) where it is [legal in 19 states](#)
- Telling a child he or she is a loser, lazy, stupid, liar, fat, ugly
- Posting videos or pictures of kids online with the purpose of shaming them
- Letting your kids know that they need to achieve a certain level of success to be a worthy member of your family (e.g. earn a PhD, become a politician, doctor, lawyer)
- Suspending a child from school (underlying message is that you are so bad, we don’t even want you here)

Adults who shame children were likely shamed themselves as children. However, this is not a valid reason for using shame. If you’re not sure how to respond to your kids’ behavior without using shame, you can learn positive alternatives in Priceless Parenting’s [online parenting classes](#).

Considering the Link Between Shame and Suicide

Tragically there are plenty of examples of kids whose experience of shame has contributed to their decision to commit suicide. This shame may have come from parents, teachers, peers or other adults.

A [13-year-old girl](#) from Tacoma, Washington jumped from a bridge to her death on the freeway below. A day earlier her father had posted a video of him cutting her hair as punishment for not listening to him. While this wasn’t the only shaming thing he did to her, it was the last thing he did.

Publicly shaming kids by posting videos or pictures online is harmful. When something appears online, your kids feel the whole world knows and it’s devastating.

Sometimes kids unintentionally set themselves up for shaming by their peers by sharing nude photos of themselves. Talk to your kids about how easily a picture they send to one person can be passed around. Discuss how they’d feel if that happened.

Your words and actions have tremendous power over your children. Use them wisely and lovingly.

Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, <http://www.PricelessParenting.com>. Priceless Parenting offers online [parenting classes](#), [parenting presentations](#) and [parent coaching](#). Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships.

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